



Technical Brief
Summer 2010

Virginia Main Street

MONITOR



Putting events to work for your downtown district

Why do you do it? That festival takes months of planning. The parade risks being rained out. There are suddenly four previously un-calendared community events on the same weekend as the chili cook-off; the band shows up late; and the vendors haven't brought enough change.

Events can be a real headache. But you still put them on. Why?

In this Main Street Monitor, we dare you to ask yourself that question: why? We'll also help you answer it.

You put on events to:

1. Raise money;
2. Increase awareness of your organization;
3. Enhance the identity of the district; and
4. Spark retail sales.

We've pulled examples from Virginia Main Street communities to illustrate these goals—and there are more great examples out there. And we'll point out best practices to help you meet those goals

But first, in order to know if you've done any of these things, you must set goals and targets. And then measure your outcomes.

Setting goals and targets

Consider the purpose of the event—upfront and afresh. Don't do an event just because you've always done it. Tradition is fine, but each event should have its own set of desired outcomes.

Are you trying to inform, educate or entertain? Increase awareness or build support from a specific audience? Get shoppers into stores? Or facilitate good community relations? Your goals might include all, or a combination of these.

Once you have your general goal, set specific targets. By what percentage do you want to increase foot traffic? How many additional dollars in sales do you want the event to bring to district merchants? Measurements for targets may include attendance figures, the amount of money raised, event feedback, retail sales figures, and the number of participating merchants.

Setting goals and targets requires strong upfront planning. But without it, there's a good chance you'll just keep doing your event as it's always been done. Now, let's take a look at specific outcomes.

Event outcome number 1: Raising money

One primary purpose for events is to raise operating funds. And even if raising money is an ancillary benefit of an event, the costs and benefits must be measured. Profitability should always be considered – and maximized.

There are lots of possibilities for the revenue structure of your event.

Ticket sales: For some events you'll charge a nominal fee. But those dollars can add up.

In-kind contributions: Consider in-kind contributions such as donations of food, the venue, or entertainment. These are sometimes easier to get from a business without a prior relationship, and they might lead to future contributions.

Sponsorships: Sponsorships quickly increase the revenue of an event. Their benefits in return can include publicity during the event, an advertisement in the program or prominent display of a company or organization logo. In addition to program ads, banner signs, and t-shirts, stages and individual components of larger events can be named after sponsors. A holiday weekend can have a parade sponsor, a dance sponsor, a craft-market sponsor, etc.

Recognize sponsors verbally, in writing, on signs, with a letter to the newspaper. Too much is never enough! Encourage all board members, staff, volunteers, and guests to thank sponsors when they see them. It demonstrates that

their contribution was indeed an effective goodwill builder. Remember that a good sponsor is about more than a cash transaction; it is a reciprocal partnership. Be sure that you are building the relationship throughout the year, not just when you need the money.

Auctions: Silent and live auctions can bring in extra funds when they are well organized and offer attractive goods. An auction can allow you to charge an affordable ticket price allowing more people to attend, bringing in more funds through the auction. For a live auction, attendees really have to be interested in the items to make the auction an enjoyable part of the event—and you need a professional, engaging auctioneer.



The crowd at Waynesboro's Main Street Muscle Car Show is an attractive audience for sponsors. Waynesboro Downtown Development Association events brought more than 25,000 people downtown in 2009.

Ad books and programs: Ad books are event programs or souvenirs composed of paid advertisements and information about your Main Street. Examples are available online at the Virginia Main Street Blog (www.dhcdvms.wordpress.com). An ad book can help you get the word out on the specifics of your event, your community, and your organization while boosting revenue. Free to participants and guests, the booklets should be paid for with ad sales, and there should only be done if they generate net income. Prospects for ad buyers include local businesses, vendors, anyone who wants to advertise a service. Encourage merchants to incorporate coupons in their ads to help in tracking retail sales spurred by the event.



Altavista on track took advantage of the foot traffic on Uncle Billy's Day to share information about their effort.

Event outcome number 2: Increasing organizational awareness

Events are an opportune time to build relationships in the community and connect new partners with your Main Street organization. Showcase the impact of your program in your town whenever possible. Any event you hold should have a Main Street information booth. The booth should be set up with photos or a video playing showcasing your successes. Have newspaper clippings available and examples of the progress you have made. Visually separate the Main Street outreach component from the on-site event headquarters to maximize the outreach.

This is your chance to spread the Main Street message. Be a great storyteller! Make sure a well-informed, engaging volunteer staffs the booth to welcome and connect visitors to the event and your organization. The most important tool they will have is the succinct story of the organization's mission—why your organization exists, what it does, and how they can support it. Note: it can't be only the program manager and one board member telling the organization's story. In a community effort like Main Street, the more volunteers and committee members who tell the story, the stronger the organization will become. Telling the story of your success is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

More music in Staunton

In an effort to inject more activity into the streets of downtown Staunton, Julie Markowitz of Staunton Downtown Development Association (SDDA) approached the city about allowing street performers or buskers (street performers who work for tips) to entertain on the city streets. She walked the downtown area with a city official to determine the best and safest performance locations and then created a map indicating the approved spots, a simple application and guidelines for performers.

While the buskers can perform between 11 a.m. and 9 p.m. any day, SDDA sponsors "Friday Night Busking" in support of the district's extended hour's program.

"It makes the street look like something is happening and supports Staunton's rich musical community," says Markowitz. "There's no ordinance because we didn't want to make the process too formal. It's gotten a great response from the residents."

The mark of success in Julie's opinion would be if this takes on a life of its own. And the first evidence has already presented itself: a group of local musicians are in the process of forming a music guild to help take amateur local musicians to the next level.



A big supporter of Staunton's busking effort has been a business new to downtown, Fretwell Bass & Acoustic Instruments.

Event outcome number 3: Enhancing district identity

What do you want your district to be known for? This district brand or personality should be incorporated into each event. Repetition is central in getting the brand established, so work your tagline into all advertisements and promotions for the event.

Think of a public service announcement for the radio: the parade doesn't just happen in downtown Culpeper, but in "*The world's one and only Culpeper.*" An announcement for a craft fair in Berryville would naturally incorporate "*Where town meets county.*" Even if it's a paid advertisement, the cost is no greater when you use it to strengthen district identity.

What's your district's brand? Listen to the Brand Personality podcast and get the worksheet at the Department of Housing and Community Development's Facebook page at www.dhcdvms.wordpress.com

For more information on effective promotional campaigns, download the Spring 2009 Main Street Monitor, "Getting Feet on the Street – Structuring Promotional Campaigns That Bring'em Out," at: http://www.dhcd.virginia.gov/CommunityDevelopmentRevitalization/VMS_monitor.htm

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Gibleet Jog in Altavista

Thanksgiving Day 2009 marked the third annual *Gibleet Jog 5K* hosted by Altavista on Track. This year's race had 197 registered runners, double the participants of the first year. The race is run not through downtown but in England Park, one block off Main Street. This eliminates the need for street closures and extra police having to work on a holiday.

Judy Finch, the event organizer and race director, believes that this is an untapped event for the merchants. She hopes to get promotional materials for Black Friday in the race packets next year. Another idea is to use the race number as the coupon and simply provide a list of discounts from each participating shop, making it less work for the merchants.

Her goal for the event in coming years is to attract more sponsors. *The Gibleet Jog 5K* has turned into a fun event for residents and their out-of-town guests and a great way to start Thanksgiving Day.



T-shirts are a great souvenir for participants, and help spread the word about the event.

Event outcome number 4: Sparking retail sales

While the retail surge might not happen on the day of the event, people might see something that inspires them. Next time they need a gift or something special, they might try out Main Street first. This works to strengthen the economy over time.



Giving out candy is step one for Radford merchants. Getting the parents back to shop is the next

During the Trick or Treat Trail in Radford, one of the merchants chose to give out coupons along with the candy. This is the second time this merchant has tried this technique. The first time she did not see any of the coupons come back. This year four made it back to the store. The coupons are good for a period of time after and can be used to measure event-related sales. Tracking the return of these coupons can be an indicator of event success.

Several Main Street communities including Altavista, Blackstone, Harrisonburg, Martinsville, and Rocky Mount have held Christmas *Win the Window* contests designed to draw shoppers into stores. Items are donated by various Main Street merchants and displayed in a vacant window or other central location. A list of items on display is provided to shoppers.

The shopper must go into each store and note the price of the specific displayed item on the list. Once all prices are noted, the shopper turns in the completed list and is eligible for a drawing with the grand prize being the entire window display. Lafayette Dickens of Downtown Blackstone, Inc has suggested to his merchants that they hand out a coupon to give people a reason to come back in and spend money on another day.

When special events are meeting a variety of goals, they may not achieve any one goal immediately, but they can be a part of your strategic plan to cultivate future donations, and to boost your profile in the community. Think of your worthwhile events that as a long-term commitment. Organize one that you can repeat at least once a year and perhaps more. Use events wisely and use them well.

Merriment in Marion

According to Ken Heath, executive director of Marion Downtown, this past Christmas season a new consignment shop downtown wanted to increase awareness and sales. Instead of going the traditional route of self-promotion, Kim Howell of Kim's Klassy Kloset recruited other downtown businesses to set up tables in a recently-vacated downtown storefront and hosted a "Girl's Night Out".

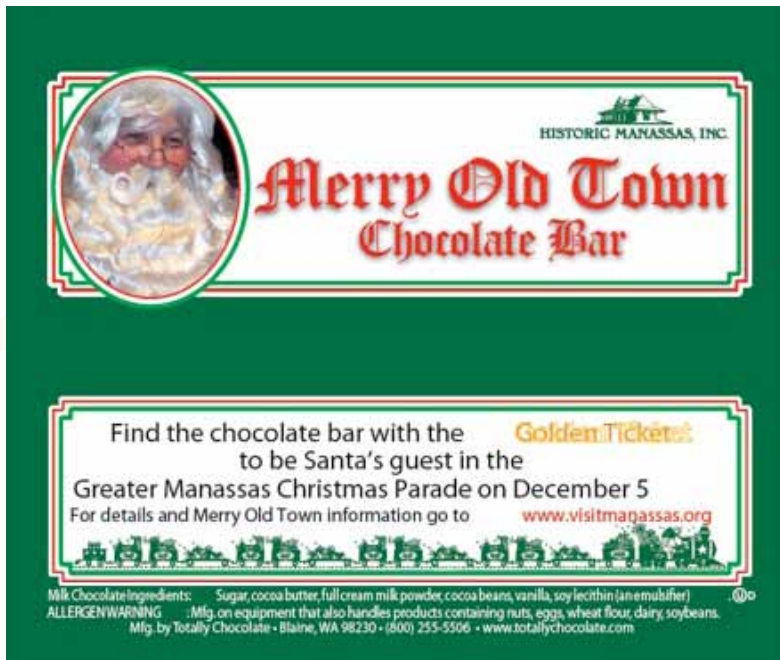
The place was packed with shoppers who came for the promotional gifts given out by downtown businesses: mini-massages and manicures and pedicures, gift bags, and bounce-back coupons to encourage repeat business to their shops. A caterer donated food; local eatery Macado's donated cookies and cheesecake; and Heath, who doubles as a DJ, donated his golden-voiced services for the event.



Making visitors an active part of an event can be as simple as this beanbag toss in Marion.



Golden Ticket Winners Kaylee and Madison Burg with Opera House Gourmet owner Jan Alten.



The candy bar wrapper that sheathed a golden ticket, somewhere in Old Town Manassas.

Making the most of the holiday parade

Not all Main Street organizations are in charge of the holiday parade, but it doesn't mean you can't use the parade to your advantage.

Historic Manassas, Inc. (HMI) has organized their entire *Merry Old Town* program around the Manassas parade, which celebrated its 64th year in 2009. The Christmas event is one of the longest running in the Commonwealth.

"It's a weekend long event," says former HMI Executive Director Patty Tracy. "Friday night before the parade, the annual tree lighting is held right in the heart of Old Town. Entertainment, refreshments and ice skating all lead up to the arrival of Santa on the Virginia Railway Express train."

Santa is escorted to the tree lighting by a local high school marching band. Afterwards the parents enjoy dinner, ice skating and more music and entertainment while Santa hears the children's wishes at the Pavilion. On Sunday, the parade runs through the center of town, the merchants hold their annual open house including street entertainment and free carriage rides throughout the historic district.

In addition to these events HMI sold chocolate with a "Golden Ticket," a play on the "Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory" idea of finding a golden ticket in a chocolate bar. The organization found a company to design the candy and wrapper to HMI's specifications and include a golden ticket in one bar.

Merchants sold the candy bars in their shops. The winner of the Golden Ticket got to ride with Santa on his float in the Christmas Parade.

Patty commented that the campaign was heavily promoted and very successful for its first year. Merchants reported that people actually came in to Old Town to buy the candy bars in the hopes of winning the Golden Ticket.

Volunteers

Main Street is a grassroots organization that needs many supportive volunteers from the community offering not just their money, but their time. There are three types of volunteers in a Main Street organization: visionary leaders who serve on the board, committee leaders and members who plan and implement projects, and reliable volunteers who help out occasionally, based on the event or project.

When recruiting volunteers for an event, if there isn't an already established pool, reach out to everyone who has helped before. Once that list is exhausted, reach out to the community through posters or the local newspaper.

Once the volunteers are in place, provide the tools and knowledge necessary to have a good experience. Just as well-trained staff perform their jobs better than staff that are untrained, volunteers who are trained will be more successful and happier. Even if the volunteer is only around for the event, make sure they know about the organization. All volunteers can be effective ambassadors.

Be sure to list the job description, location and time requirement. Whenever possible, give volunteers the type of job they prefer or help them use the experience to build new skills that they want to gain. The more they feel useful and enjoy their experience, the more likely they are to volunteer again.

Most importantly, remember to thank the volunteers immediately and give them a break to experience the event. Consider an annual volunteer appreciation event to show past accomplishments and the big picture of their contributions.

Staunton Volunteers add personality and spirit to a holiday event.

The volunteer workforce

For more information on working with volunteers, download the Spring 2007 Main Street Monitor, "Recruit, Train, and Recognize: Three Steps to Develop an Effective Volunteer Workforce," at: <http://www.dhcd.virginia.gov/CommunityDevelopmentRevitalization/Doc/Spring07.pdf>

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Top mistakes in using events to raise money

- **Forgetting that events can lose money.** On a year to year basis, any event can lose money. Don't gamble the success of your year on a chance of rain. However, with a mix of revenue sources, including events, your organization can ride out a rainy event season.
- **Not considering all the costs.** The time staff works on an event is a cost associated with that event, especially if you don't have a corps of reliable volunteers. Consider that cost in the decision making process, especially the opportunity cost of pulling staff away from district programs.
- **Getting the date wrong.** Especially in high season, crowds can shrink from competing events. If you can't clear a spot on a community calendar for an event, you'll have to realistically assess the potential crowd before moving forward.
- **Putting all eggs in one fundraising basket.** Each organization needs a mix of revenue sources. Virginia Main Street recommends a third from events and other earned income, a third from local government, and a third from sponsorship and membership.
- **Taking a fundraiser's time away from asking for individual gifts.** If possible, separate fund development from events. Don't only ask for support for events, but encourage organizational sponsorships and more general organizational investments as well.
- **Distracting major donors from considering larger gifts.** Sponsors respond to the opportunities presented, and you may be leaving money on the table. Don't settle for a \$1,000 event sponsorship if you could have a \$5,000 annual sponsorship. Provide an opportunity: make a broad range of sponsorships available, and work to grow the giving level of each supporter.
- **Unintentionally excluding someone.** While events will almost always exclude someone, you should consider who is being excluded when you're planning the event. High-priced events exclude those without the disposable income to attend. Dances exclude people who do not like to dance. Casino nights exclude people who disapprove of gambling. Consider who your event might be leaving out.



Keep the merchants in mind

Not every merchant will be pleased with all events, but the negative response can be minimized with a few simple steps:

- Minimize events that close the streets;
- Make sure that the physical setup, i.e. booth plan, does not interfere with the business entrances;
- Let the merchants know how they can participate;
- Provide an events calendar to merchants 12 months in advance; and
- Listen to the merchants. Which event had the biggest impact for them?



Hey merchants! Once they are in the door...

- Be proactive and talk to every customer in the store.
- Use open ended questions. These questions start with who, what, where, why or when and can't be answered by yes or no.
- Let the customer do most of the talking. Use active listening to offer suggestions.
- Most customers turn right when entering a store. Use the front right table or fixture for your best selling items.
- Everything communicates. Your appearance, gestures and body language communicate to the customer. 90 percent of communication is non-verbal.
- Have management and sales team maintain a positive attitude at all times.
- Service is king.
- Make product recommendations to compliment the original item.



These tips are offered by Marc Willson, Retail Industry Consultant for the Virginia SBDC Network. Their Virginia Small Town & Merchant Program (STAMP) offers workshops and relevant guidance designed to meet the specific needs of main street retailers. For more information or to bring the Small Town & Merchant Program to your community, contact the SBDC Retail Industry Consultant at (703) 999-3048 or marc@virginiasbdc.org or check out <http://www.virginiasbdc.org/DocumentMaster.aspx?doc=1141>.

Measuring success

Having the necessary tools in place to determine the success of an event is just as important as planning the event itself. Keep a binder with all of the event information: i.e. contacts, in-kind donations, time tables, vendors, volunteers...everything. When the event is over take time a few days later to evaluate how it all worked out. If something didn't, be honest and make a note of it. This will help next year so the appropriate changes can be made and the same mistakes don't happen again. This is also helpful if a new person takes on the event planning, no need to reinvent the wheel.

To measure success for merchants, send out a short, post-event survey thanking them for their support/participation. Consider using a free survey tool online such as SurveyMonkey.com, but don't underestimate the importance of a follow-up visit with business owners.

Describe the event's purpose and goals to help guide the responses. Ask three to five questions to gauge level of participation and satisfaction with the event. Use this to gather information about in-store traffic increases and sales levels. Were higher than the



The number of ducks is just a starting measurement for South Boston's annual Ducks on the Dan Derby Duck Race.

previous year? These surveys should be performed after each event and compared annually when preparing and revising the next year's promotional action plan.

Additional resources

Dono, Andrea, ed. 2009. *Revitalizing Main Street: A Practitioners Guide to Comprehensive Commercial District Revitalization*. Washington, DC: National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Wendroff, Alan. 2004. *Special Events: Proven Strategies for Nonprofit Fundraising*. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Burnett, Ken. 2006. *The Zen of Fundraising: 89 Timeless Ideas to Strengthen and Develop Your Donor Relationships*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Ciconte, Barbara & Jacob, Jeanne. 2009. *Fundraising Basics: A complete guide*. Sudbury, Massachusetts: Jones and Bartlett Publishers.

Virginia Main Street



VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Partners for Better Communities

www.dhcd.virginia.gov



The Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development's Main Street Program provides downtown revitalization technical assistance to Virginia communities, using the National Main Street Center's Four Point Approach™ (Organization, Promotion, Design & Economic Restructuring) to comprehensive preservation-based revitalization of historic commercial districts.

Web site

www.dhcd.virginia.gov/MainStreet/

Blog

dhcdvms.wordpress.com/

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